JAMES YOUNG SIMPSON & PAINLESS LABOR

Sir James Simpson (1811-1870) was a leading Obstetrician of England. A prodigy, he entered the University of Edinburgh at the age of 14 and gained his medical degree at 21. His graduation thesis was so good that it promptly won him an assistantship to John Thompson, Professor of Pathology. He published an article on diseases of placenta, with noteworthy papers on peritonitis in fetus (1838), and an exhaustive article on hermaphroditism which appeared in cyclopedia in 1839. At the age of 29 he was elected Professor of Midwifery in the University of Edinburgh. Young Simpson took up new duties with characteristic energy. His course on obstetrics rose from former dullest course in curriculum to the most sought after and best attended. As a practitioner, his skill combined with his charm, tenderness, and sympathetic manner soon made him the busiest obstetrician in all Scotland.

Ether anesthesia was first administered by Morton in Boston in 1846, and soon Robert Liston in London operated, using it. In January 1847, Simpson introduced ether into obstetrical practice and reported a clinical trial in November 1847, with the reservation that the compound was irritating to the bronchial tree and GI tract. The likelihood that other compounds might be superior, prompted Simpson to conduct a series of experimental trials with a number of chemical agents, one of them being chloroform. In his experimental series, he was the first one to inhale chloroform vapor. Having found it effective, he lost no time in testing its validity in the delivery room. He was the first to use it in childbirth. This was met with considerable criticism from those ardent souls, who believed that the pain of childbirth was a part of God’s curse when Eve ate the forbidden apple. Simpson pointed out that God did not rejoice in pain and when He extracted a rib from Adam to make Eve, He first caused a "deep sleep" to fall upon him, justifying anesthesia. In 1853, he utilized chloroform in helping Queen Victoria through the pain of child bed, delivering her seventh child, Prince Leopold. This silenced all criticism and Simpson was made a Baronet in 1866.

Simpson devised Acupressure, an ingenious haemostatic process in which he passed a thin needle through tissues around arteries, thereby compressing the vessels without devitalizing the tissue. He invented uterine sound (probe), obstetrical forceps, introduced spongiments to dilate the cervix, and recommended iron wire sutures for deformed pelvis. He introduced the term ovariotomy. His other contributions were made in the field of archaeology and in medical history.

Surprisingly, Simpson proved to be one of the most bitter opponent of the practice of antisepsis introduced by Lister and waged an active warfare against it until his death in 1870. It is speculated that as he had been in conflict with Lister’s father-in-law Syme for years; jealousy towards a new method could have been the reason. He was a good lover and an equally strong hater.

Simpson’s death at the age of 59 led to one of the largest funerals ever held in Scotland. However, due to his family’s objection, he was not buried in Westminster Abbey, which would have been a great honor to him.